Communicating student learning progress: What does that mean and can it make a difference?

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Abstract

Traditionally in schools, the main method of communicating students' academic performance has been the summative end-of-semester report, and the focus of much of this communication has centred on reporting achievement against year-level standards. While semester reporting largely remains established practice, the advent of new school management systems has seen schools embrace a practice known as 'continuous reporting'. Though well-intended, early analysis would suggest that the potential benefits of this relatively new process are inconsistently understood, and reveal a confusion between progressive instalments of feedback versus feedback on student progress. Such confusion may be indicative of other gaps in the organisational knowledge in schools. For example: How is progress defined? How is progress measured? What is meant by continuous reporting of progress? Who is the audience of continuous reporting? And, importantly, what is the impact of continuous reporting?

This paper will present initial findings of a research project that is examining current policies and practices related to communicating student learning progress in Australia, including semester-based and continuous reporting. The project seeks to understand the form, function, and impact of current policies and practices, and provide an evidence-base for identifying processes for communicating student learning progress that will make a difference.

Introduction

Each year, across Australia, school communities engage in various activities that are focused on communicating information about student learning. These include student school reports (end-of-semester, cycle-based); interviews (parent-teacher, three-way student-parent-teacher); portfolios (hard copy, digital); exhibitions and performances, and so on. Given the effort and time devoted to such activities in all schools each year, questions of interest are: how effective are these practices and do they make a difference to student learning?

These questions prompted the research project reported here. We are investigating alternatives to the traditional 'school report' as a way of communicating the progress students make in their learning. Traditionally, school reports have functioned as the cornerstone of communication to parents – providing a final reckoning of a child's achievement across a range of subjects each semester. However, they have a chequered history with respect to how stakeholders regard them. Dissatisfaction with school reports has been expressed by parents and educators alike, with criticisms focused on the kinds of measures used, the level of detail provided, the accessibility of language used, and how meaningful the information presented actually is (Hollingsworth & Heard, 2018). Research developments in recent years have provided increased understanding about the nature of learning and individual student learning growth, challenging assumptions about age-based lock-step curriculum (Masters, 2017a). This has prompted new thinking about curriculum and what it means to assess learning progress, together with ways to improve reporting and communication processes. A particular focus of this project is to explore alternatives to judging and grading student learning only in terms of age/year level expectations, and of ways to capture and communicate the progress – or growth – that students make in their learning over time.

Alongside this new thinking about student learning and progress has been the advent of electronic school management systems and data tools, and these have encouraged some schools to embrace new reporting practices. A further area of research interest involves investigating and understanding how these electronic systems and tools are influencing the ways that schools report and communicate information about student learning.

The Communicating Student Learning Progress Project comprises six areas of investigation:

1. an environmental scan of existing system policies on reporting and communicating student learning progress

2. an examination of current school practices related to reporting and communicating student learning progress

3. an examination of how electronic systems and tools influence the ways schools report and communicate student learning progress

4. a review of the alignment between reporting and communication practices and current learning and assessment theory and practice

5. a collection of stakeholder views about what works well and what doesn't with respect to current practices for reporting and communicating student learning progress

6. a collection of stakeholder views about what they want and what they need with respect to reporting and communicating student learning progress.

In the sections that follow, findings from early analyses in two of these areas are presented: current school practices related to reporting and communicating student learning progress and influences of electronic systems and tools on the ways schools report and communicate student learning progress. Further details about these and each of the other areas of investigation will be published in a final project report.

Early observations and questions about reporting and communicating

Our examination of current practices related to reporting and communicating student learning progress has involved the collection and analysis of school reports and other related documents (e.g. reporting policy documents, documents explaining reporting practice, etc.) from primary and secondary schools. Reports have been collected from different jurisdictions and systems and include examples from Foundation to Year 12.

We have made two observations from the early analysis of these reports and documents, which have given rise to the questions that follow.

Observation 1: The contents and formats of school reports vary considerably

School reports vary with respect to such things as:

- elements reported (academic achievement, social and emotional development, work habits, etc.)
- learning domains reported (all subjects, English and mathematics only, domain-level only, sub-domain level, etc.
- learning context descriptions
- assessment task descriptions
- measures (performance indicator rubrics; scales; grades; level indicators, etc.)
- reference to evidence of performance (explicit reference; no reference)
- comments (included, type, excluded)
- individual and comparative assessment information (individual results, cohort results)
- indication of next steps in learning (explicit, specific, generic, not included)
- the contributors (learning domain teachers; homeroom teachers, pastoral teachers, school leaders, students, parents etc.)
- additional artefacts (photos, etc.)
- links to other information types (interviews, portfolios etc.).

Questions provoked by Observation 1

- What are the consequences of this variability? For students? For parents? For teachers? For schools? For systems?
- How does the 'grain-size' of what is reported impact the interpretation of information for different stakeholders?
- What are essential inclusions for a meaningful report?
- What is the purpose of school reports?

Observation 2: The term 'progress' is used often but rarely describes learning gain

Learning progress has been defined as the gain, growth or increasing proficiency along a continuum of learning (or learning progression), as measured over time (Masters, 2016, 2017b). This definition aligns with the perspective presented in the Department of Education and Training's *Through growth to achievement: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian school*s (2018, p. 30), which states:

> *Assessment and reporting arrangements must be updated to accurately describe the progress a student has made in the acquisition of knowledge, skill and understanding over time, and the level of attainment that has been reached, regardless of how other students are performing or what the standards may be for a certain age or year level. A prerequisite for such arrangements is a sound understanding of what long-term progress across the curriculum looks like, informed by student performance data.*

Early analysis of the school reports and other documents collected indicates that the term 'progress' is used in a variety of ways and some of these are inconsistent with the government's perspective.

Many of the school reports (and associated documents) analysed thus far profess to communicate student learning progress. In the explanatory preamble of these reports, claims that the student report is a means 'by which [parents] can learn about student progress', or are part of the school's efforts to 'provide a coherent picture of each child's academic progress' were common. Teachers commented on the 'steady', 'significant' or 'solid' progress a child had made in their learning. Progress was sometimes applied to a five-point scale tied to performance in assessments where, for example, a student who received a grade of 'outstanding' due to 'performing well above the expected level of *[the school's]* students at this year level' was thus also said to have made 'Outstanding progress'. In one report, colour-coded 'progress indicators' were applied to denote whether a student had 'shown improvement', was 'holding steady' or – worryingly – 'has gone backwards'. There appears to be

a misconception that progress over time is synonymous with a student's performance over time.

Examples of the ways that the term 'progress' is used in the reports examined to date are displayed in Table 1.

Despite the relative frequency of the word 'progress' within reports, few seemed to convey a meaningful impression of how a student had progressed. A report that communicated a student's learning progress over a term or semester would, in metaphoric terms, produce a 'time lapse' impression of that child's growth within a learning domain over that period, explaining the gains that child has made.

Early analysis has uncovered very few school reports that communicate progress in any recognisable 'time lapse' manner. The most salient attempts at revealing progress were presented as simple, graphical representations. Many reports from Victorian schools made use of a 'sliding dot' graphic. This indicates teacher judgements of a student's progress within the Victorian Curriculum over a six-month period. One report presented a line graph at six-weekly intervals to indicate the rise and fall in student achievement in undefined percentage terms, providing some sense of change over time (albeit score fluctuation rather than learning gain). Others presented term-by-term column graphs to similar effect. One school report contained the student's results

on a sequence of formative assessment tasks (labelling them as 'progress tasks') as well as their result in the end-of-unit summative task. However, here too, the impression was more of performance fluctuation rather than learning gain, as the formative tasks sometimes appeared to assess discrete, rather than consistent, knowledge and skills. Most reports still appear to either communicate a child's performance in summative assessment tasks (in secondary schools) or provide a summative listing of a student's attainment of various learning outcomes (in primary schools).

Questions provoked by Observation 2

- How might schools move towards a shared understanding of what progress means?
- Do teachers understand the difference between reporting attainment and reporting gain (progress/growth)?
- Do teachers have a sound understanding of what long-term progress across the curriculum looks like, and ways to collect student performance data to enable them to accurately map student learning progress?

These early observations prompt important questions about the purpose and form of school reporting and communicating student learning progress.

Table 1 Use of the term 'progress' in school reports

Ways the term 'progress' is used	Examples from school reports
To map student learning against age-based curriculum standards	Students, teachers and parents are provided with a clear and concise picture of a student's achievement and progress at a point in time. Teachers map the student's learning against the achievement standards, and place the student on the learning continuum that best reflects the student's level of performance and progress. The report card's A to E rating will tell you how your child is progressing against the expected standard. Teacher judgements about your child's progress against AusVELS. Your child's progress (Legend).
To indicate a student's performance on tasks relative to one another over time	At a minimum there must be at least two items per term, spaced to give a sense of the student's progress.
To describe attainment of specific outcomes in a learning area	A checklist is provided to show your child's progress in each area.
To comment positively about a student	She has made steady progress this semester. He is progressing extremely well. Has shown progression in his science understanding this semester. She is making very pleasing progress.
To indicate ways to support student learning	Regular practice will support his progress. Things you can do at home to help her progress.
To link to other forms of communication about student learning progress	Teachers will give you a clear indication of progress at the upcoming parent-teacher meeting.

It is anticipated that further analyses of the reports and artefacts together with analyses undertaken in the different components of the research project will provide more insights into what might constitute effective practices related to communicating student learning progress.

Influences of electronic systems and tools: Challenges and possibilities

Given the current prominence of electronic school management systems and data tools in schools, it is important to investigate how schools use these to prepare student reports. Such tools enable 'continuous reporting', which is becoming an increasingly preferred part of a school's communication around student learning. Continuous reporting refers to the practice of reporting in regular instalments. Typically, at key moments throughout the semester, teachers provide updated assessment information to the system, which is then made visible to parents and students. These updates can include various indications of a child's performance on assessment tasks, for example scores and grades, students' work with annotated feedback, curriculum content descriptors or achievement standards attained, task rubrics, and teacher comments to the student on their achievements and areas for improvement.

The recent uptake of continuous reporting appears to have had a significant impact on end-of-semester reports, particularly in secondary schools, where several of the semester reports examined appeared as much 'leaner' grade summary documents than others. Some of these reports explicitly refer the presumed parent-reader to the school's parent portal for more detailed assessment and teacher feedback to the student. In these schools, the end-of semester reports appear to be a somewhat perfunctory approach to meet the mandated requirement of two written reports per year.

The extent to which electronic tools and systems have improved the communication of student progress, however, remains a question for further investigation. Schools often extol the benefit of providing timely, regular information to parents about how their child is performing on assessment tasks 'in real time', as they are completed, rather than all at once at the end of the semester or year, when it is often felt to be too late for parents to seek intervention. However, to provide progressive reporting instalments is not the same as reporting on learning progress. More analysis is needed, therefore, into how schools typically use continuous reporting, and to what extent it is being used to communicate a student's growth in learning, as well as their performance on assessment tasks.

Discussions with providers of school management software have revealed promising opportunities related to school reporting. For example, several systems have integrated data analytics functionality, meaning the capacity exists for schools who undertake regular standardised testing to seamlessly access this data and communicate gains in student results. Some providers offer a curriculum tracking function, wherein teachers can indicate what key content knowledge and skills a student has mastered, represented along a curriculum continuum, and make this visible to parents at regular intervals. Tools already being used by teachers to justify student performance on individual assessment tasks can be repurposed to provide explicit evidence of learning progress or gains made. For example, many systems have the capacity to upload samples of student work, or rubrics, annotated to indicate gains in skill, knowledge or conceptual understanding. These provide opportunities for teachers to concretely demonstrate the progress a child is making in their learning over time.

Conclusion

Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, to date there has been little research done into reporting on student learning (Hollingsworth & Heard, 2018). The Communicating Student Learning Progress Project has the potential to contribute important information about current understandings and current practices related to communicating student learning progress in Australian schools, and to set the stage for further research in this area. The project will culminate in a report that details a set of design principles and implementation recommendations for effectively communicating the progress students make in their learning.

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